



HOLY UNCTION



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SOME FACTS

Its Origin.

We read in the Gospels that our Lord healed by many outward signs, by speech, by touch, by clay, by washing, and also that he taught his disciples to use both laying-on of hands and oil (Mk. vi, 7-18). He also said that they should do greater things than he did because he went to his Father, by which he meant that they would be able to give to men not merely physical and mental healing, but that complete salvation (healing) which comes by union with himself in membership of his Mystical Body, the Church.

Its Progress

We see that the Church after Pentecost took him at his word, and a number of cases of healing (e.g. Acts ii, 1-9) are recorded. At a later stage we find a settled ministry of healing in which both private prayer and prayer by the official Church is enjoined with confession of sin and anointing with oil (James v, 13-16)*. There is abundant evidence that in the ages after the death of the Apostles these practices were

* *Is any among you suffering? let him pray. Is any cheerful? let him sing praise. Is any among you sick? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith shall save him that is sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, it shall be forgiven him. Confess therefore your sins one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. — JAMES v, 13-16.*

Elders (presbyters) may mean bishops or priests, but it is difficult to be sure of the exact form of the ministry at this period. It is to be done "in the Name", i.e. in the Person of the Lord — our Lord himself does it by means of his accredited minister-members. The prayer is the prayer of faith, i.e. the Church's own prayer, not the mere pleading of an individual. In response to the prayer of faith the Holy Spirit acts, for it is he who has prompted the prayer. It is not clear if the anointing is to be thought of as an absolution, or if separate absolution is enjoined, but probably it was to be a single action after the mutual confession. The Western form of service clearly implies that the anointing conveys assurance of forgiveness.

continued, and St Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons (who knew St Polycarp, who knew St John) in his book "*Against Heretics*" gives detailed lists of both Christians and heathen cured of sickness and even raised from death by the Church.

Its Reason.

This activity of the Church was, of course, because she believed herself truly to be the Body of Christ and therefore to have all the powers that he had, and to be his Instrument of Salvation (complete healing of body, mind and spirit) in the world. Our Lord came to re-introduce into a fallen world perfect Humanity, as God first designed and made it (which was why he usually called himself Son of Man, meaning THE HUMAN BEING), and to enable men to be united into that Humanity in his Mystical Body the Church, where they would grow into his likeness and ultimately share his heavenly life.

Its Decline.

Holy Unction as a means of healing declined when the Church in part lost her sense of being truly Christ's Body, over against the world, by reason of the freedom from persecution which came with the conversion of the Roman Emperor, and the entry into the Church of many unconverted and half-converted people. By the Middle Ages Holy Unction had come to be used only as a preparation for the final healing which is death. In the fifteenth century its use for normal healing was discontinued, and holy wills, relics, and holy objects were used instead, often with less edifying results. But, of course, at no time did the Church cease to pray for the sick. The Western form of

Extreme Unction continued to be used as a preparation for death although its prayers and general intention are self-evidently for restoration to health in this world.†

The Prayer Book.

The lowest level was reached at the Reformation and the Office of Visitation in the Book of Common Prayer seems to assume that sickness is a punishment from God not to be resisted. Logically, this would lead to the bizarre conclusion that doctors and nurses were fighting against God, but men are rarely as bad as their worst doctrines. The service has been referred by the Convocation of Canterbury to the Liturgical Commission for revision.

Its Revival.

The Christian miracle of the twentieth century has been the almost universal re-discovery amongst all types of Christians of the doctrine of the Church as the Mystical Body of our Lord, and this has brought the return of the Sacrament of Healing. In the Church of England the Guild of Health was founded by three clergymen in 1905, but has become interdenominational, and the Guild of St Raphael for communicants of the Church of England only was formed in 1915. The movement had gained some recognition before the revised books of 1927-28 were produced and found some expression in them. In 1935 (1936 in York) the Convocation of Canterbury authorised a form of service which is still authoritative, although this also has been

† The term "Extreme Unction" does not, as is often supposed, refer to the use of anointing "in extremis", but to the fact that Holy Unction is the last (the third) kind of anointing possible for a Christian; the other two belonging to the rites of Initiation. It is still the Extreme Unction if it is used to cure arthritis. But also its use "in extremis" as a preparation for death is no less a gift of healing when seen from the eternal viewpoint.

referred to the Liturgical Commission for review. Many priests, however, prefer to use the Western form, which is very beautiful and fitting.

Its Use.

The normal minister of the Sacrament is the parish priest, acting as the Bishop's deputy, and using holy oil which is blessed by the Bishop every Maundy Thursday, but in emergency the priest himself may bless the oil. In the Ordinal it is the Bishop and not the priest who is charged to heal the sick. It should be administered like any other sacrament in the normal course of pastoral duty, and like, say, Holy Baptism, it is the work of the Holy Ghost and is in no sense dependent upon the skill, knowledge, holiness or special powers of the minister.

OTHER METHODS OF HEALING

The Medical Profession.

At the time of our Lord's earthly life medicine was not very scientific, and was in the hands of heathen, though often very worthy practitioners, except that the Jewish priests also exercised some medical authority under the Law of Moses (*vide* the miracle of the Ten Lepers). Their place was naturally taken by the clergy, and there was for many centuries little contact between the medical practitioners and the Church. In modern times, however, medicine has become a most honoured profession, and many of its members are deeply Christian men and women, as also are their assistants in the nursing profession. Medicine has been baptized into the Church and it is obvious that Christians ought to co-operate to the full as patients or ministers with the two great professions, who do God's work whether or not the particular members acting are themselves professing Christians. It must not for a moment be thought that Holy Unction is a substitute for medical attention, or a sort of last resort when medical attention fails. Like prayer, of which it is the counterpart, it is on a different level, and it not only has direct effect upon the recipient but also helps the doctor, the surgeon, the nurse and others to do their work more effectively.

But the medical profession nowadays is very conscious that bodily illness is never simply bodily, and that all medicine is in some sense, as they say, psycho-somatic, i.e. mental-bodily in character. We might think that we have only to add the spirit and say that it must be pneumo-psycho-somatic to be complete. But Holy Unction is not merely spiritual; it is supernatural, and is the placing of the *whole person* into

the hands of God for his decision, and its operation is not the application of a spiritual, as distinct from a mental or bodily power to assist healing. Like Holy Communion it is to preserve body and soul, the whole man. In the absence of medical help God often works miracles, but to seek for Holy Unction and to neglect the proper ministry of doctors and nurses would be unchristian folly.

Personal Healers.

There are people, not necessarily Christians, who claim to have special powers of healing. There is no doubt that some have, and that if their powers are consecrated to God they may sometimes be used by him. But there should be no hesitation in a churchman's mind that in a choice between a healer, whether Christian or not, and the authorised Sacrament of the Church, the latter should be used as a part of the whole sacramental life. The difference is that of the touch of a presumably gifted human being and the Touch of Christ through his Body the Church. Moreover, by no means all who claim to have gifts of healing are genuine, and those who do possess a gift have it in varying degrees of potency. There are spirit healers who claim to be guided by spirit doctors, and there are others like the Christian Scientists who pretend that illness is an illusion. Churchmen should rely upon the normal ministry of the Church as supernaturally assisting, and sometimes over-ruling the scientific work of doctors and surgeons.

WHAT IS REQUIRED OF PATIENTS?

Faith.

The Sacrament is not an isolated thing, although it may be used in an emergency with the minimum conditions. Normally, it is part of the whole sacramental life of a Christian, and should be used with the other means of grace and prayer day by day. The sort of faith that is required is not a blind confidence that God will do what is desired, but truly Christian faith, which is trust in a God who knows best, who wills to do what is best, and cares lovingly for the person in need. Faith is prepared to accept whatever God decides, knowing that it is not only wrong to oppose the will of God, but that the will of God is in the last resort the best thing possible. Faith is prepared to accept joyfully recovery, or death, or continued pain, whichever glorifies God and is in accordance with the pattern of his purpose. No patient ought ever to be anointed unless he has, or is trying to have, this sort of faith, or is unconscious. Our Lord will accept, "Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief", but he will not tolerate, "If thou canst . . .?"

Penitence.

Somewhere, perhaps far back in time, possibly only in the sin of Satan, but very likely in the person concerned, the evil being contested was caused by sin. In any case sin weakens and spoils all levels of life. It would be of little use to receive bodily healing in order to sin more lustily. So repentance for sin is an absolute necessity. Normally, this is expressed by the Sacrament of Penance, but in emergency, or where there is obstinate and ignorant prejudice against it, it may sometimes, though not often, be dispensed with. But then some expression of penitence must be made,

and a general confession and Absolution used. There can be no spiritual, and therefore no complete mental or physical health without cleanness of soul.

Charity.

It will be seen that the conditions required are the same as for all other sacraments, but the third requisite is often forgotten. Enmity towards others, unforgiving temper, indifference to their comfort or good, and all other forms of selfishness or hatred which affect other people must be absolved, but in their place there must be the attempt, at least, to have a positive concern for the good of our neighbour. If we do not love the brother whom we see, we do not love the God we do not see. Our Lord is quite explicit: love of both God and neighbour, the one through the other, is a prerequisite of Christian health.

HOW IS IT ADMINISTERED?

In Church.

It is best to come to an early week-day Eucharist if possible, and in that case after the Post-communion or Prayer of Thanksgiving the patient comes again to the Altar-rail and kneels. The Priest reads (in the Convocation rite) a sentence, and comes and lays hands upon the patient's head saying the appropriate words. Then dipping his thumb in the holy oil he names the person and signs him on the forehead with a cross in the Name of the Blessed Trinity. He replaces his hands on his head and continues the prayer appointed. He then wipes the surplus oil from the forehead and from his thumb with cotton wool (and possibly uses bread crumbs as well, both wool and crumbs being afterwards burned) and returns to the Altar to give the Eucharistic Blessing. Finally, he takes the patient by the hand and directs him back to his place.

Alternatively, the anointing can take place before or after an office, but there should be present members of the laity to supply the Prayer of the Church. As in other sacraments the priest acts as the voice and hands of the Body of Christ as well as by virtue of the priestly authority received in his ordination. Both are necessary.

At Hospital or in a Sick-Room.

Here the same order is followed, and it is best if the administration can be at the same occasion as a clinical Communion, but there are emergencies when this is not possible. When there is no prospect of recovery the Convocation form directs that the anointing should be before instead of after the Communion, which is then the Viaticum, or food for the journey of the departing soul.

There is a form of anointing of the parts of the body associated with the five senses: eyes, ears,

nostrils, lips and hands. The feet are also anointed in this rite, which makes provision for the laying-on of hands beforehand.

HOW IS IT FOLLOWED UP?

Life in the Body of Christ.

Wholeness, health, is in the perfect human being, God made Man, and our health is by integration into him. The follow-up, therefore, consists in living the life of the Body by regular prayer, worship, and use of the sacraments. Intercession for others helps to keep this before the mind, and frequent thanksgiving for the gift received helps to develop the healthy attitude of Christian joy, whether or not the disease or pain is at once overcome.

WHAT RESULTS MAY BE EXPECTED?

Recovery.

Normally, patients recover, either slowly, as the doctor would expect, but sometimes spontaneously. It is tempting to call this a miracle, but every doctor knows of many cases of spontaneous recovery where no religious help has been given. Science deals with cause and effect on its own plane. It is unwise to make claims of miraculous healing after Holy Unction for it is always quite impossible to say what would have happened had the Sacrament not been given. The important thing is that God gave a gift of grace, and that he used this for the person's health. Bodily recovery may or may not have taken place otherwise, but Holy Unction is God's sign of his concern for the *whole man*, not merely for his body and mind. Of course, it is human to have greater feelings of gratitude when bodily healing is given.

A Happy Death.

Naturally, this is to be expected in many cases, and Holy Unction, as it has been used right through the Church's history, does cleanse and make ready for death. With the aged or very ill, death is a welcome friend, but if the passing seems tragic, as with younger people, this is because we fail to trust, or to believe fully in the *glory that shall be*.

Non-Physical Healing.

Sometimes relief from bodily sickness or pain is not given. This is hard to accept, but great Christians have always rejoiced at being allowed to suffer, and have allied their pain or weakness to the Cross. There

is always a reason, even if we cannot see it, behind suffering, and God only allows it because of a greater good which is being effected by it. The acceptance of this is one of the fruits of the gift of grace in Holy Unction, and a clear proof of its spiritual efficacy.

The Invariable Result.

Everyone who receives Holy Unction in good faith, penitence and charity is rewarded by a gift of tranquillity which was not there before. This is so universal an experience that by itself it would be an outward proof of the validity of the Sacrament of Healing. It comes by reason of the contentment which is bound to follow the action of placing the whole matter into God's hands for his infallible decision.

HOLY UNCTION IS ONE OF THE SEVEN SACRAMENTS OF THE CHURCH AND SHOULD BE USED BY ALL LOYAL CHURCHMEN WHEN REQUIRED. IT IS THE DUTY OF EVERY PARISH PRIEST TO PROVIDE FOR IT AND TO TEACH HIS PEOPLE ABOUT IT.